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The Death of the Self?

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The Death of the Self? Narrative Form, Intertextuality and Autonomy in Joshua Ferris's
Then We Came to the End

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company in which the members agree for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.

— Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance”

Then We Came to the End, described by a reviewer as “the *Catch-22* of the business world,” (qtd. in Ferris n. pag) was published to general acclaim in 2007, just months after Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan warned of an impending recession. Ferris’s debut novel is set in an advertising agency in Chicago in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Most of the action takes place in the agency office, and the narrative tells the story of a group of workers whose fortunes rise and fall as the economy fluctuates and the dotcom bubble bursts. The book is a satire of everyday office work, as well as a comic critique of the larger capitalist system that this work supports. Along with the unusual feature of the first-person plural narrative voice that it employs throughout, the novel’s other main trait is its manipulation of time: the narrative stretches, compresses and rewinds time, rendering the reader unsure of the narrative present. In addition, Ferris weaves a series of

intertextual references into the novel, some more overt than others. Taken together, these features reveal the novel's wider ambition to explore the notion of subjectivity and the erosion of the self under capitalist structures. The frequent references to Emersonian self-reliance serve to position this exploration within the complex debate regarding Emerson's own views on capitalism and the individual. Ferris's novel is remarkable because he deals with these issues not only at the thematic level, but also by weaving through the structure of his narrative.

Critics read the book as comic depiction of office life and politics, a critique of corporate America, and an attempt to capture both the exhilaration of the dotcom bubble and the gloom of its subsequent bursting. Reviewers did mention one of the novel's most prominent features, its use of the first person plural narrative voice, but on the whole they looked no further than asserting that it was an apt choice for the book's office setting. James Poniewozik, reviewing for the *New York Times*, described it as an "exotic trick play of a device," noting that it was appropriate for representing "groupthink." David Burr Gerrard thought it conveyed successfully the way that "the frustrated ambitions and petty resentments of office workers can coalesce into one giant, catty consciousness." Critics were also reluctant to consider the relationship between the book's comic nature and its preoccupation with unfunny issues such as the loss of a child, breast cancer, and redundancy. Poniewozik found the story "acidly funny," but didn't quite explain how the humor might sit with the more serious subject-matter. Carrie O'Grady, reviewing for the *Guardian*, concluded that it is "hard to work out, in the end, whether Ferris's novel is funny or sad."

The oscillation between humor and sadness is a disconcerting feature of the novel, and gauging its level of sincerity remains one of the challenges its readers have to face. However, the intrusion of darker material into a seemingly light-hearted novel is not without precedent. Ferris's book owes a clear debt to the Black Humor novels of the 1950s, 60s and 70s, and to Joseph Heller in particular, but the intertextual web that Ferris weaves encompasses more than knowing nods to Heller. Much of the book's humor derives from the arch, ironic, knowing tone of the narrative, while the tone of detachment and self-reflectiveness displays an obvious debt to older postmodern authors such as Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo. The sadness, meanwhile, arises from moments of human connection and instances of empathy and suffering that mostly take place outside of the office, which is the main setting of the novel. This juxtaposition of comic postmodern playfulness on the one hand and sincerity on the other is recognized as one of the hallmarks of post-postmodernism, or "the new sincerity." Adam Kelly rightly notes that Ferris has been influenced by David Foster Wallace (205), while James Annesley also sees Ferris as one of the McSweeney writers who typify Wallace's influence (132). In reconfiguring Heller's black humor for the twenty-first century, Ferris appears to have heeded Thomas Pynchon's advice, succinctly dispensed by McClintic Sphere in *V*: "keep cool, but care"¹ (236).

In order to explore the many ways in which Ferris keeps cool, but cares, I begin by arguing that the over-arching concern in *Then We Came to the End* is the issue of self-

¹ This phrase has attracted considerable critical interest and remains open to interpretation. It has been used to illustrate the argument that loss of affect in postmodernist fiction is intended as criticism, rather than presenting itself as a symptom of postmodernity (see Witzling 386). Stephen Hock argues that the phrase "anticipates and proleptically answers in the affirmative the question .. 'can irony both acknowledge the disjunction at the heart of our culture and care about what that disjunction means?'" (64). It is in this sense that I find the phrase appropriate in relation to Ferris.

reliance, made explicit and prominent throughout the book through frequent references to Emerson's philosophy. The book examines the tensions between the demands of corporate life and the desire for autonomy, placing this dilemma in the context of a national narrative that has always striven to reconcile those opposing forces. Alison Russell has noted that "the author captures perfectly how contemporary cubicle workers are torn between the satisfaction of being a part of 'the team' and the Emersonian (and very American) directive to be, above all, a nonconformist," further arguing that

[t]he tension between the one and the many, between the desire for individualism and also for being part of a group, signals a shift from older examples in the genre of workplace fiction, reflecting as well the changed environment of American office places in actuality. (319)

The quest for an authentic, self-reliant self, and the need to express such a self in the office setting of the fictional world, as well as in the textual setting of the novel, are manifest through the author's structural as well as thematic choices. Ever since *Bartleby* put down his writing tools, refused to copy, and opted out of the world of work, American literature has been fascinated by the fate of the individual under capitalism, and the office has proven a setting well suited to dramatizing existential crises and exploring expressions of selfhood. In *Then We Came to the End*, the theme of self-reliance is implicit in the subversive use of the first-person plural narrative, prompting questions such as: who speaks, or who is the hero of this novel? The collective narrative voice challenges our often unquestioned assumptions about the novel as a genre: that it has a protagonist, and that, whether in first, second, or third person singular, the novel is in one way or another concerned with conveying the experience of that protagonist. The

American literary canon in particular has been shaped by strong statements of (mainly white) masculine individuality: “Call me Ishmael,” “My name is Arthur Gordon Pym,” “You don't know about me without you have read a book,” or “I am an American, Chicago born” are all resonant opening lines that assert the primacy of the individual voice in American fiction.

Ferris's opening is of a different sort: “We were fractious and overpaid. Our mornings lacked promise” (3). The second sentence deceives with its simplicity, but as I will argue later on, it hints at the novel's complex engagement with temporality. The first sentence sets the tone: it highlights the humorous, often ironic, intent of the collective narrative voice, while it establishes the focus on a group of co-workers as a form of collective self. However, during the brief but poignant glimpses of life outside the office, Ferris hints towards a world of empathy and compassion that seems far removed from the cynicism and dark humor of the collective office voice. There are passages and storylines that revolve around painful issues and personal dramas, but the suffering depicted in these scenes sits comfortably alongside the story's humorous office setting. The deft movement from pathos to bathos, from private pain to ironic public posturing, enables Ferris to “keep cool” while also exploring his characters' attempts to create meaningful, authentic relationships outside of the work environment. The human need for connection and empathy is thus seen as an authentic desire to express selfhood in a way that is not possible in the office environment, where individuality is subjugated and personal lives are seen as “unprofessional.” One of the most powerful examples of caring whilst keeping cool can be found in the story of Janine Gorjanc's suffering. Months after Janine's daughter is found dead, a “missing child” poster of her is still up. Tom Mota,

one of the most significant characters in the novel, climbs the billboard and takes the poster down so he can put an end to Janine's torment. In a statement that in many ways exemplifies the mixture of pathos and bathos that gives the book so much of its power, the narrator muses: "That Jessica Gorjanc's fourth-grade picture blown up to inhuman dimensions had been left to languish long after her actual body was put underground wasn't just cruel disregard for human suffering. It was bad business practice" (136).

Ruth Maxey was the first critic to highlight and explore the link between Ferris's narrative strategies and his thematic concerns. She argued that "Ferris links narrative experimentation to the national zeitgeist ... [and] sets out to interpret the United States in new ways" (209). Maxey placed most of her emphasis on the use of the first-person plural, but we can extend her enquiry by examining the first-person plural narrative device alongside the novel's complex use of temporality as well as its foregrounding of its artificiality through extensive use of intertextuality. These devices contribute to Ferris's exploration of the zeitgeist, but more specifically they make visible the link between the ways in which narrative and financial markets organize. The emphasis on self-reliance and the autonomy of the individual ultimately suggests that this is Ferris's point: that whereas the logic of the market de-humanizes (not only through greed or through its emphasis on corporate identity, but also through the ways in which it incorporates into a larger structure the human factor), the logic of the narrative restores humanity, even if that narrative is paradoxically not narrated in the first person singular, the form most closely associated with expressions of the self.

The novel's title is taken from the opening lines of Don DeLillo's first novel, *Americana* (1971). Like Ferris, DeLillo uses the world of media corporations to explore

the individual subject within capitalist structures, and to ask questions about the very existence of an authentic self. Benjamin Bird provides a useful overview of critical approaches to the issue of the authentic or unique self in *Americana*. He cites Robert Nadeau and David Cowart, both of whom have explored DeLillo's questioning of the fate of modernist subjectivities under postmodern conditions. Nadeau, for example, argues that the novel examines how new communication technologies have "trivialized out of existence" the notion of an "authentic or unique self" (qtd. in Bird 185), while Cowart sees in the novel DeLillo's acknowledgement of "the tenuousness of all 'subject-positions'" (qtd. in Bird 185). Bird asserts that DeLillo's protagonist narrator is "disoriented by the instability of contemporary selfhood, which he blames on the influence of media technologies, and is nostalgic for the relative coherence that belonged to modernist notions of subjectivity" (185). Ferris reproduces that sense of disorientation in his narrative, but does not display the kind of nostalgia that critics see in early DeLillo, demonstrating instead that some relative coherence is not fundamentally incompatible with the fractured, media-saturated world he represents. *Americana's* narrator, David Bell, makes explicit not only the theme of the authentic self, but also its relation to marketing, advertising and the media. In a passage that recalls Lolita's childish faith in advertising slogans, Bell narrates:

As a boy, ... I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. (130)

The novel's self-aware usage of narrative point of view adds further complexity to Bell's perception of himself as some sort of simulacrum shaped by consumerism. DeLillo's exploration of subjectivity is manifest in the discursive part of the novel, but it is also embedded into its narrative structure: the first-person narrator announces early on that he constructs his own reality (58), which of course he does both as subject and as narrator, but he also claims "I was living in the third person" (58), and "I became third person in my own mind" (333). DeLillo's complex engagement with the narrating and narrated self, and his fascination with the ways in which the language of advertising constructs a new reality while altering the concept of subjectivity, are both taken up by Ferris, ensuring that *Americana* "resonates in distinctive ways throughout Ferris's book," as Alison Russell notes (323).

DeLillo and Ferris both worked in advertising, and their experiments with point of view owe a lot to that experience. David Bell, for instance, went into TV production so as not to work in the shadow of his father who was an advertising executive. Yet as another ad executive explains to him, the distinction between the two is less clear than Bell would like to think: "The TV set is a package and it's full of products," Glenn Yost tells Bell. "Programs are not interrupted by commercials; the reverse is true" (270). He goes on to explain that TV advertising "moves him [the viewer] from first person consciousness to third person." (270). Paul Giaimo sees in Yost's cynicism a rejection of "the suffering of the diverse human subject" (28), and Ferris's novel in many ways takes issue with Yost by suggesting that advertising does not efface the first person, and that the suffering human subject can still be articulated in fiction and incorporated into unstable, fragmented, ironic postmodernist narratives. The story of Lynn Mason demonstrates that.

Mason needs surgery for breast cancer, and she instructs the team to come up with an advertising campaign that would make a person with breast cancer laugh. The seeming impossibility of creating a humorous ad campaign around breast cancer is a reflection of the book's larger thematic concerns, and Ferris highlights this beautifully through a structural narrative solution: the literal heart of the novel is taken up by Mason's story narrated in a more traditional third-person voice that Ruth Maxey rightly describes as "virtuosic" (213). The coupling of emotional and bodily suffering with a switch in narrative point of view, and the accompanying move from the office to the home and the hospital room, allow for different readings of the dominant voice. On the one hand, casting aside the first-person plural places renewed emphasis on the self and suggests that the individual is not effaced by corporate culture. On the other hand, the third-person perspective also emphasizes Mason's loneliness as she faces her ordeal; the collective voice of the office suddenly speaks of solidarity and togetherness.

Alison Russell identifies two "pivotal" characters in the novel: Lynn Mason and Tom Mota (326). Mota is modelled on DeLillo's "Mad Memo-Writer" from *Americana*, believed to be "a small grotesque man who had suffered many disappointments in life, who despised the vast impersonal structure of the network" (21). Tom Mota is an updated mad memo-writer for the electronic age, sending numerous emails to his former colleagues after he has lost his job, and turning up at work near the end of the novel brandishing a gun. Mota is borrowed from DeLillo, but he is imbued with further intertextual meaning because his "mad" memos usually consist of long quotations from Emerson's essays. The references to Emerson, which Ferris uses liberally, underscore the importance of the themes of authenticity and the fate of the self under capitalism.

Emerson's stance on capitalism is complex and often contested. One way of approaching Emerson's politics is by considering his debt to Hegel, and comparing that to Karl Marx's (Tom Mota, it should be noted, is keen to quote both Emerson and Marx in his emails). Hegel provides both subsequent thinkers with the concept of a universal mind, but Marx and Emerson diverge in their championing of the collective and the individualist respectively as the agents of that mind. However, their thought converges when it comes to capitalism's capacity for reification and de-humanization. Ferris's narrative negotiates those two positions. The use of the "we" points to a Hegelian concept of universality, but it also suggests that the authentic self has been annihilated by the corporate environment of the agency, which is a microcosm for corporate America. However, the moments of human empathy, solidarity and connection, such as Mota taking down the "missing child" poster, offer glimpses of a more authentic life outside the office. Through the borrowing of the memo writer who is invested with meaning derived from Emerson, Ferris links DeLillo's preoccupations with the authentic self, and his explorations of the self as subject and object, with Emerson's idea that capitalism requires "drudges" who are stripped of selfhood. Robert Milder argues that "throughout most of his career Emerson was ambivalent toward capitalism, regarding it on one side as the economic manifestation of contemporary individualism and on the other as the gravest threat to individualism" (55). Thomas D. Birch also notes the ambivalence in Emerson's views. "On the one hand," he writes, "he feared the pursuit of material wants and the vast network of machinery, which would dull human energies and self-reliance." On the other hand, "Emerson spoke of machinery and commerce as stimulating human energies and promoting unity in the American polity" (385).

This ambivalence can also be found in Ferris's novel, where human creativity is celebrated whilst its monetization is lamented. The importance of Emerson is announced in the novel's epigraph from "The American Scholar," a famous passage that emphasizes the loss of individuality brought about by rapid commercialization:

Is it not the chief disgrace in the world, not to be a unit; — not to be reckoned one character; —not to yield that peculiar fruit which each man was created to bear, but to be reckoned in the gross, in the hundred, or the thousand, of the party, the section, to which we belong...

Earlier in the same essay, Emerson makes a bold claim that would have made an even more apt epigraph for *Then We Came to the End*: "Young men of the fairest promise," he writes, "are hindered from action by the disgust which the principles on which business is managed inspire, and turn drudges, or die of disgust, some of them suicides" (104).

Ferris's novel deftly juxtaposes the creativity required of people working in advertising with the sense of drudgery that comes with regular office work. His characters may not die of disgust, but there are frequent references to work-induced depression and to self-medication at work; the people known as "creatives" in the industry find that their creativity has the potential to destroy them when it cannot be divorced from the world of business and commerce. Authenticity and self-expression are thus shown to be under threat in Ferris's world as sure as they were in Emerson's. Russell sees in Mota's "deteriorating mental health and refusal to accommodate 'commerce'" a comic embodiment of Emerson's ideas, noting that even though he is "far from an ideal Emersonian man," he still succeeds in prompting his colleagues to re-evaluate their beliefs (325).

Near the end of the book, Tom Mota turns up at work dressed as a clown, and it appears that he intends to shoot his former co-workers. In a novel where it has been hard for the reader to decide whether to laugh or cry, the episode has the potential for either tragedy or farce. The latter wins as the gun turns out to be fake, but the reader's sense that Tom Mota could well have gone back to his old workplace to exact revenge remains all too plausible. Mota explains why he feels disgruntled: "To conform is to lose your soul. So I dissented every chance I got and I told them fuck you and eventually they fired me for it, but I thought, Ralph Waldo Emerson would be proud of Tom Mota" (343). Indeed, Emerson famously writes that "whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist" (178), but Ferris suggests that the idealism of non-conformism may be incompatible with the demands of office work or mortgage and maintenance payments. In summary, then, the intertextual references to DeLillo and to Emerson help to place Ferris's concerns in both a contemporary and a historical context. While these references support and amplify the novel's main themes and highlight issues of individuality and self-reliance, there is a third, very significant intertextual presence in the book, which brings a fresh dimension to these ideas.

In the paperback edition of the novel, one of its endorsements comes from Jim Shepard, who describes it as "the *Catch-22* of the business world." The analogy is very apt, as the novel's satirical intent and its exposure of the absurdity of office life are indeed reminiscent of Heller's world. However, the similarities between the two novels are more extensive than the use of black humor and the emphasis on the absurd. For example, the tone of the novel, in its mixture of comedy and tragedy, detachment and empathy, evokes Heller's, and like his predecessor, Ferris also delights in the absurdities

of formal language. A good example can be seen when one of the workers, Jim, calls his great-uncle Max, a farmer who lives in a world far removed from that of the advertising agency. Jim explains that people in his profession are referred to as “creatives:”

“Well, if all that’s true,” said the old man, “that would make you creative creatives creating creative creative.” There was silence as Max allowed Jim to take this in. “And that right there,” he concluded, “is why I didn’t miss my calling. That’s a use of the English language just too absurd to even contemplate.” With that, Max hung up. (189)

The verbal humor is coupled with the clear implication that these “creatives,” unlike the farmer, do not produce anything tangible. Instead, they work in a self-referential environment where the adverts they produce will often have little or no connection with the value or usefulness of the goods they might help to advertise. The narrator acknowledges this later on in the text by placing emphasis on the role that language plays in advertising:

When we said, “Don’t miss out on these great savings!” we really meant we gotta unload these fuckers fast. “No-Fee Rewards” meant prepare to pay out the ass. Words and meaning were almost always at odds with us. We knew it, you knew it, they knew it, we all knew it. (329)

The narrator concludes that the only time that language had a literal meaning was when it came to lay-offs: “The only words that ever meant a goddamn were, ‘We’re really sorry about this, but we’re going to have to let you go’” (329). Joseph Heller worked in advertising when he wrote *Catch-22*, and his interest in the absurdities of language

cannot be unrelated to his occupation. Like Ferris, he delights and despairs in the ability of language to conceal and falsify, but also to reveal and clarify. Heller's preoccupation with what Lindsey Tucker calls "the problem of language," "its decay, its inability to convey significant information" (324), can be seen most clearly in his later fiction.

Describing a novel as "the *Catch-22* of the business world" is eye-catching and engaging, but it also obscures the fact that the author of *Catch-22* wrote a much-overlooked novel about the business world himself: *Something Happened* (1974). The novel is narrated by one of American literature's most memorable anti-heroes, Bob Slocum. Slocum is racist and sexist; he is a bad husband and a bad father, and he is ruthless in his quest for professional success. As the extent of his monstrosity reveals itself to the reader, it also becomes clear that Slocum functions as a symbol for the erosion of the self under corporate structures. Evan Carton argues that the novel confronts "the issue of the individual's uncertain identity and political complicity," claiming "to represent contemporary social reality in America with an exploration of the power, the boundaries and the nature of the self" (42). Lois Tyson links the issue of identity more explicitly to Slocum's occupation in an unnamed corporation, arguing that he has succeeded in "commodifying his personal image according to corporate standards." Heller's protagonist, she writes, "uses a corporate economy as his template to commodify, and thereby escape, his existential inwardness" (37). Slocum works for a big company, where he holds some kind of managerial position. Yet Heller never quite discloses the precise nature of the work Slocum does, or the work of the company. In an interview with Per Winther, he claimed that he opted for a generic type of company because he wanted it "to function as a symbol for the upper level of American society, so

that he talks about the company, or I talk about the company often the way one would talk about a country” (21). In this context, it is instructive to note that many critics mention the advertising agency as a setting for the novel: a clear line from DeLillo to Heller to Ferris shows the advertising agency to be a suitable vehicle for explorations of subjectivity and selfhood.

Something Happened is narrated in the first person and in the present tense. Heller calls his narrator unreliable, explaining how Slocum often withholds information in an attempt to exercise mastery over his story (Winther 20). At the same time though, the present tense also underscores the fact that there is a lot he does not know about the outcome of his own story: “events are happening as Slocum is telling them,” Heller explains (Winther 20). This creates a complex dynamic. On the one hand, the withholding of information grants the narrator power over the reader. On the other hand, the narrator is shown to be a powerless agent in a present-tense narrative with no benefit of hindsight and no knowledge of the outcome of his own life story. Heller further complicates the picture by noting that “Slocum sees himself from a schizophrenic viewpoint very often, as somebody separated from himself... He very frequently talks about himself as being separated from himself” (Wither 19). The relationship between narrative point of view and individual agency is clearly an area where Ferris is indebted to Heller. Furthermore, the experimentation with narrative voice and first and third person that we see in Ferris, Heller and DeLillo, is suitably undertaken in a setting related to advertising; we recall here Glenn Yost, who tells David Bell that advertising commodifies the individual, turning subjective consciousness into third person. In other words, all three novels consider the complex ways in which an understanding of what

makes us human and unique is eroded by our relationship to capitalism and consumerism; a relationship mediated and shaped by advertising.

Writing in the *LA Review of Books*, Carmen Petaccio described Heller's book as the "most criminally overlooked great novel of the past half century;" a claim that she went on to substantiate not only by analyzing the novel, but also by providing evidence of its impact on a younger generation of writers and by showing that Heller demonstrated "a prescience with respect to the concerns and subjects of present-day narrative fictions." Petaccio juxtaposed two passages, one from Ferris and the other from Heller, and showed their striking similarities in "tone and subject." Evan Carton's critical assessment of Heller's novel also helps to illuminate the relationship. Carton argues that in its

conflation of selfhood, textuality and capitalism, in its ambivalent quest for the origin of a self-divided narrator-protagonist, ... in its concern with the question of value in mass culture and its thematic interest in, and formal reliance upon the devise of repetition, imitation, cliché, deadlock and stasis, *Something Happened* aligns itself with ... "Bartleby." (44)

Carton's masterful description of Heller's novel is largely applicable to Ferris book as well, though later on I will also note some significant ways in which the two diverge. Heller is an important intertextual presence in Ferris's novel because his narrative strategies connecting point of view and narrative voice to advertising and commodification help to illuminate Ferris's preoccupation with the erosion of self. However, the debt does not end there. The links with both *Catch-22* and *Something Happened* also draw attention to the importance that Ferris attaches to his narrative's temporal structure.

Ferris manipulates narrative time in order to draw attention to the different rhythms that govern bodily time, work time, and leisure time. He uses a convoluted narrative structure to highlight the dehumanizing nature of office time, and also to draw attention to the monetization of time. The use of narrative time, and especially the use of repetition, owes a clear debt to Heller, who used repetition to powerful effect in his novels. Ferris does not simply imitate. The juxtaposition of subjective, “human” time and office time enables him to explore the possibility of sincere connections and authentic relationships in the highly inauthentic world of the advertising agency, and this is where he differs from Heller, whose vision is much darker and negative. Lindsey Tucker argues that Slocum is “considerably more dehumanized at the end of the novel,” having “turned himself into a machine of sorts” (340). She reads the books as a “brilliant and compelling warning” of the erosion of the self, a view largely shared by Lois Tyson. Tyson argues that “a consciousness commodified on the corporate model accomplishes its flight from existential inwardness by reducing psychological experience to the kinds of abstract relations that obtain among commodities in late capitalist culture” (37). Ferris similarly concerns himself with the relationship between selfhood and corporate identity and, like Heller, he uses time as both theme and technique to underscore the complex nature of temporality.²

The choice of an advertising agency as the setting for the book is effective in highlighting the late twentieth-century dominance of what Franco Berardi calls

² Thomas LeClair offers a succinct account of Heller’s use of narrative time by noting that “characters, actions, words” are “combined, recombined in probable ways, and even repeated.” He argues that “the novel succeeds because its repetitiveness is wholly functional, creating a double effect: one mimetic, one metaphysical” (246).

“Semiocapitalism:” “the rise of post-Fordist modes of production, which ... takes the mind, language and creativity as its primary tools for the production of value.” Berardi examines the ways in which human capital is exploited for profit, and he concludes that “exploitation is exerted essentially on the semiotic flux produced by human time at work” (21-22). “Human time at work” is a key phrase: it implies clearly the existence of other kinds of time, and by suggesting that time itself is the commodity that workers sell and employers buy, it draws attention to the fact that modern capitalist economies no longer rely on material production. The novel places considerable emphasis on the fact that the office workers do not produce anything tangible; several passages throughout the novel highlight the immateriality of the work produced at the agency, and also of the difficulties of attempting to monetize creativity, communication, and the imagination. One effective way in which the novel raises this question is through its extensive references to the notion of the “billable hour,” a literal and metaphorical expression of postindustrial capitalist enterprise. Near the start of the book, the narrator describes the work environment and talks about how the workers love to tell each other stories when they should be working:

Both were good stories and together they killed a good hour. Some of us loved killing an hour of the company’s time and others felt guilty for it afterwards. But whatever your personal feelings on the matter, you still had to account for the hour, so you billed it to a client. (16)

The use of the verb “account” is especially apt here, bringing the activities of storytelling and money-making into conflict. Further wordplay suggests that the workers are prisoners, with work described as “time served” (7), and references to “our time in the

system” (98). Frequent references to time and puns that draw attention to its importance can be found throughout the novel, but the author also engages with time through the structuring of his narrative, which is organized along an aptly intricate time scale. Ferris not only thematizes the effects of contemporary financial markets and the monetization of life on individuals. He also builds those concerns into the discursive structure of his narrative, using repetition and temporal disruption.

In broader terms, the story is told in chronological order. It starts in the late 1990s, the age of prosperity and the last good years of the dotcom bubble. The first layoffs in the firm culminate in the months leading up to 9/11, and we see the workers again in the middle of the decade, most of them in new jobs, but with casualties along the way. Within this linear framework, though, episodes are often narrated out of sequence, while others are repeated. Tom Mota’s dismissal from work is a case in point. The dismissal is announced to the reader in the prologue. The narrator is still talking of the early, prosperous days of “balanced budgets and the remarkable rise of the NASDAQ” (10), but a small proleptic aside informs us that “[a] few years later” Tom Mota would start to behave erratically because “his life had changed dramatically” (10). We learn that he was laid off on page 11, whereas the narrative of “[w]hen Tom found out he was being let go” starts later, on page 15. The balance of power between employer and employee is mirrored here in the balance of power between reader and character: knowing that Mota is going to be fired well before he finds out for himself casts him as the victim of both his employers and his literary creator. Ferris also uses analeptic narration. The stories of Janine’s return to work after the loss of her child, and of Mota’s emails, are both narrated later in the novel, but Mota is still employed at the agency then, so they actually take

place earlier in the sequence. Frequency and repetition are also deployed to complicate the timeframe. Where page 28 tells us the story of Mota's chair, on the following page the narrator explains that "Mota had been laid off the week before Chris Yop told us the story of his chair" (29). Yet later still, on page 57, Mota is still employed, berating the dismissal of other colleagues, unaware of his own impending doom. Ferris playfully inserts some temporal markers that help to establish the narrative present, but also delights in embedding stories in the manner of a modern Scheherazade. On page 27 we are told of a meeting scheduled to take place on "a Tuesday in May at twelve-fifteen in the afternoon." While the workers wait for their boss to arrive at this meeting, they tell each other stories which in turn contain other stories, and twelve pages later we are brought back to the present and find the workers still waiting for their boss. Ferris therefore distorts the narrative's temporal structure in several ways, some subtler than others, ensuring that the frequency and duration of events, as well as their place in the temporal scale of the novel, become increasingly unclear and unstable. These techniques can create dramatic irony, seen most clearly in the story of Mota's dismissal. Yet our sense of readerly power over the characters is not guaranteed: alongside the dramatic irony, Ferris creates uncertainty. Our sense of not knowing where we are in the story's timeline deftly mirrors the plight of the workers who don't know how secure their jobs are. The author further emphasizes the subjective and oppressive nature of office time: "Some days, time passed way too slowly here, other days far too quickly" (152), the narrator explains.

Some days felt longer than other days. Some days felt like two whole days.

Unfortunately those days were never weekend days...Time was being added to

our lives...we found ourselves wanting to hurry time along, which was not in the long run good for our health. Everybody was trapped in this contradiction (277). Such passages humorously remind us that to wish the working week away is to wish to hasten our own demise, but underneath the humor there is a serious preoccupation with an uncertain future. Time referents in the novel explicitly query the relationship between the present and the future: “We, too, thought it would never end” (12); “The best time was always early in the morning...it was the worst time, too, because of the anticipation of the end of those things” (52); “We had moved on, or regressed, rather, back to the question of who would be the next to go” (294). The instability of the novel’s structure, and its preoccupation with the future as a source of anxiety, are thus related to the sense of precariousness felt by the office workers as the economy begins to falter.

The instability of the present and the morphing chronology of the book are also related to the use of narrative voice. The first-person plural narrative merges several individual voices, and in so doing it merges individual stories. If we were to unpack the first-person plural, we would find the same day at the office narrated by a different worker, and therefore experienced and told in a different way. We thus move away from the idea of a definitive version of the book’s chronology, because that chronology relies on whose story we are following. This convoluted proliferation of stories is, I suggest, how the book replicates at the temporal narrative level the logic of the market. To understand this logic, we can turn to Christian Marazzi, who provides a lucid and elegant explanation:

on the financial markets speculative behavior is *rational* because the markets are *self-referential*. Prices are the expression of the action of collective opinion, the

individual investor does not react to information but to what he believes will be the reaction of the other investors in the face of that information. It follows that the values of securities listed on the stock exchange make reference to themselves and not to their underlying economic value. This is the self-referential nature of the markets, in which the disassociation between economic value and exchange value is symmetrical to the disassociation between individual belief and collective belief. (26)

Marazzi's account of self-referentiality is a good way of understanding the temporal and narrative dimension of the financial market and its relation to the novel. An equally perceptive and illuminating account of the workings of the financial markets comes from George Soros, whose words surprisingly echo the structure of the novel:

There is no reality independent of subjective bias...but there is a reality that is influenced by it. In other words, there is a sequence of events which actually happens, and this sequence incorporates the effect of the participants' biases. It is likely, that is, that the actual course of events differs from the expectations of the participants, and the divergence can be assumed as an indication of the distortion that comes into play... the actual course of events already incorporates the effects of the participants' bias. (qtd. in Marazzi 26)

Soros's explanation begins by positing the existence of an actual sequence of events, while also demonstrating that this sequence is altered by the participants; another catch-
22 whereby we have to assume an actual course of events and understand at the same time that this course is modified by everyone who takes part in it. The paradox of a

reality that is modified through the very process of its unfolding describes the narrative point of view and the temporal pattern of *Then We Came to the End*, and it also recalls the metafictional games of earlier postmodernist writers. In some ways, we could describe Ferris's complex structure as analogous to John Barth's Moebius strip from *Lost in the Funhouse*. Yet the difference between "high" postmodernism and Ferris's attempt to "keep cool, but care," can be seen in the way he adds one final metafictional twist to the story, and in so doing affirms the persistence of the self, the need for connected communities, and the production of creative work whose value is not primarily monetary but aesthetic.

Early in the novel, Ferris introduces Hank Neary, a character who is "working on a failed novel." "A small, angry book about work" is how Hank describes it. "Now that was a guaranteed best seller," sneers the narrator. "There was a fun read on the beach" (72). This seemingly trivial metafictional joke at the author's expense gains greater significance as the narrative draws to a close. Hank Neary is a published author, and his former co-workers go to one of his book readings. The story that Hank starts to read out is the story of Lynn Mason the night before surgery; it is, word for word, the story we have already read in the novel.³ Neary explains that he gave up on his angry book about work, thereby claiming for Mason's story another ontological level. The narrative that turns out to be the book within the book, or books, and therefore the one furthest removed from reality, also turns out to be the sincerest representation of human subjectivity, and the one that humanizes the ruthless boss of the main narrative. Hank Neary had to put aside his book about work in order to write a successful one, but Ferris shows that

³ Alison Russell discusses the range of critical responses to this metafictional twist in her article, noting that this metafictional twist has produced conflicting interpretations.

sometimes the novelist can have it both ways. As the narrative draws to a close, the co-workers who had gathered for a drink disperse until the narrator becomes first person, concluding with the words “We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me” (385). The tone of intimacy and final affirmation of selfhood can be understood best when contrasted with *Something Happened*. Evan Carton describes Heller’s title as “a strong candidate for the generic title of The Novel itself,” since the novel as a genre concerns itself with an originary “fact or reality” from which the narrative unfolds, a process that Carton links to “the traditional Western model of the self” (43). Carton demonstrates that Heller’s narrative plays upon this convention but does not allow his character self-realization; “[t]his essential self,” he argues, “is not (re)discovered” (44). Ferris’s novel can be read in fruitful contrast: if the phrase “something happened” is to be read as an expression of the novel (an account of events happening to or witnessed by a protagonist), “then we came to the end” is a playful variation on the generic convention. The workers come to the end because they lose their jobs; the narrative comes to an end that is announced before the narrative even begins; and “we,” the first-person plural voice comes to an end as the narrative seeks to establish a meaningful connection between narrator and reader. David Bell becomes third-person in his own mind so that DeLillo can highlight the commodification of selfhood. Slocum, meanwhile, sacrifices his individuality to a corporate identity and divests himself of interiority. Ferris, in contrast, claims a space for the self at the end of his narrative. Away from the world of the advertising agency where selfhood and creativity are monetized and commodified, the subject regains its power to create, to narrate, and to connect. That final conspiratorial “you and me” restores to the text its belief in selfhood, and it argues powerfully that

selfhood can still be realized in fractured, repetitive, imitative and self-referential narratives.

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